N E W S - L E T T E R

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A well-proportioned mind is one which shows no particular bias; one of which we may safely say that it will never cause its owner to be confined as a madman, tortured as a heretic, or crucified as a blasphemer. Also, on the other hand, that it will never cause him to be applauded as a prophet, revered as a priest, or exalted as a king. Its usual blessings are happiness and mediocrity.

Thomas Hardy - The Return of the Native.

In addition to bibliography and description of courses in which our approach to criticism is incorporated, we wish to present to members of our group articles in which method is specifically discussed. The first of these articles has been contributed by a member of our group who has been successful in applying his insights and technique both to scholarly writing and to journalism.

Notes on the Use of Psychological Tools in Literary Scholarship

by Leon Edel

It is, perhaps, one of the largest problems in the field of literary study today and one about which confusion exists at every turn. How shall the biographer, the critic, the literary historian use the new psychological tools which have been made available to him by the discoveries and insights of Sigmund Freud and his successors? The sociological-historical tools have, on the whole, been mastered: awareness of their function has existed for a long time and their use has been largely a question of orientation and understanding. Moreover, they belonged to the field. When was history, properly practised, not criticism, analysis, even literature? and when was sociology, in its broadest sense, not an extension of historical understanding? Psychological understanding is quite another matter. Much of it, we might say, had existed long before the understanding of psychology itself; and then the insights of Freud, who leaned heavily at moments on literature in certain of his expositions, opened up new avenues -- and also much confusion. About no field, in our time, has there been more generated heat and misunderstanding than the sudden and often misguided (because uninstructed) attempt to use the psychological tools.

They have been used, first of all, by the psychologists themselves, in an invasion of the field of literature; and if, on the one hand, the psychologists are undoubtedly qualified to use the tools, their literary equipment, especially in the realm of critical understanding, has been sadly wanting at times. Nevertheless their papers on "applied" psychology, or applied psycho-analysis -- the latter term, used by Ernest Jones, strikes me as questionable -- have shed light on hitherto dark and tortuous passages of literary and biographical study. The psychologist turned litterateur is not, properly speaking, a student of literature. His appraisal of literary material on a quasi-clinical level reduces a given literary case to the language of his profession and of the consulting room, and ends up with the discovery of some aspects of a given artistic neurosis. When they speak of "applied psycho-analysis" they are only compounding the confusion. Psycho-analysis, properly speaking, cannot be practised upon inert materials: a living consciousness must be available, providing fantasy and rationalization, "transference" and all the clinical evidence brought into a room by a physical presence. The dead author can neither be laid upon a couch nor

rendered articulate. He is approached only through his work, his letters, anecdotes of his friends, and such other traces as he has left behind him during his passage through the world. To presume to "psycho-analyze" such material is to misuse the very term and to misunderstand the psychological tool.

If, therefore, the student of literature is prompted to take with a grain of salt the speculations of the psychiatrist, the latter in turn is equally justified in regarding as presumptuous the essays of the literary student trying to turn psychologist. The psychologist, applying his knowledge to literary evidence is perhaps on firmer ground, even when he makes palpable errors and crude speculations. He, at least, invokes clinical experience and observation and some systematic study of himself; usually he has the benefit of having undergone psycho-analysis, and if he is properly endowed and trained, his requisite sensitivity to human material can make him extremely sensitive to literary material--which is always human material. Usually, also, he is not trying to speak as a literary specialist, but as a psychologist who happens to have encountered certain literary material which he is trying to illuminate. Can the same be said of the reverse situation? The answer would be that it rarely can, for the literary student, however expert in his own field, is usually an amateur psychologist wading in deep and difficult waters. He may read up on the Oedipus complex and apply it right and left, but his application of it is foredoomed to be forced, and even false, since the Oedipus complex, roughly named by Freud out of literature, is an amalgam of many situations: the very word "complex" denotes it. So, too, the use of so-called Freudian symbolism in literary studies is fraught with danger. It has all the pitfalls that the psychologists themselves have recognized, and principally the danger of "projection" on the part of the literary student of his own problems and fantasies into the work he is studying. Symbols cannot be as fixed or as psychologically meaningful when lifted from the printed page as they are when communicated in a living context.

We have, thus, a mutual invasion of two specialized fields by experts usually qualified to work only in one of them. The literary student turned psychologist -- rampant with his new-found psychological instruments -- succeeds at best in reducing his material to a semblance of a clinical report that belongs neither to literature nor to psychology, and which understandably arouses "resistance" -- both literary and psychological -- among traditional scholars. At the same time the practising psychologist, who has remained on his own ground but merely borrowed literary material as grist for his particular mill, can hardly regard his confrere from the literary faculty as anything but a rank, and perhaps even bungling, amateur.

In these invasions of literary-psychological territories let us remember, therefore, that it is the literary student who is borrowing the non-literary tools. The psychologist is at all times using instruments proper to himself; he is merely borrowing material from outside his consulting room. The burden therefore lies much more with the literary student; it is he who must equip himself to use the psychological tools accurately. For only then is he in a position to challenge the psychologist on valid ground, if necessary; moreover, in learning to use the psychological tools he must also respect his own ground. The psychological study of a creative literary personality and of the literary process cannot be made on generalizations obtained from psychological text books. It can only be made by a person who equips himself through extensive psychological training and clinical experience, or through the personal experience of psycho-analysis. Even then he must beware constantly of the great problem of "projection" and the danger of a subjective misreading of texts. For even as a psycho-analyst must undergo analysis himself so as not to project his own problems into the experiences of a given patient, so the literary psychologist must be capable of extracting himself from his relationship to his material. Freud was acutely aware of this and his warning to biographers in the speculative essay on Leonardo da Vinci has been too little heeded: I allude to that passage in which he describes how biographers convert the unfamiliar face of their subject into the familiar faces of their childhood. A psychologically

oriented biographer or critic must know that if he has been attracted to certain material rather than to other material it is because of certain subjective factors within himself, and he must seek to understand the reasons for his interest and his preferences. He has, in this sense, an advantage over the non-psychologically oriented biographer or critic who often uses literature as a mirror for himself.

How is the psychological instrument to be used? I submit that the literary student turning psychologist for the nonce -- unlike his psychological counterpart -- must use his new-found tools to gain his own insights into the literary material and then he must bury the tools and write literary criticism or history or biography on his own ground and not that of the psychologist. He must convert and translate into the language of his own field. He is writing, after all, not as a psychologist but as a literary scholar and he must beware of "selling out" his own field or setting down a study that in the end is neither literary nor psychological, bulging with non-literary terminology. He need not talk about "sibling rivalries" when he can describe quite factually his subject's relationship to his brothers and sisters; he need not invoke Oedipus when he wishes to discuss fear or guilt or anxiety. The psychological tool enables the literary scholar to see and discover areas of creative experience hitherto hidden from us. The scholar may learn from a slip of the pen in a manuscript or letter much about a subject under study; but he need not labor the slip -- he can quite simply use the knowledge to find the verifiable facts to which the slip should, under psychological study, lead him. The psychological instrument can prevent us from being trapped by a writer's rationalizations; it can show us often the genesis of a work and it can explain a writer's predeliction for certain subjects in preference to others. It is not, in reality, as new a tool as it seems; many critics have intuitively practiced psycho-criticism for years with great success. The psychologically oriented scholar can, however, today do so with greater accuracy than his less experienced predecessors. He can catch the small and insignificant detail, which the run-of-the-mill scholar may overlook, and usually does, and use it to illuminate his material. The curious thing also is that, practised in this way, psycho-literary scholarship can be rendered completely acceptable to the non-psychologically oriented scholars. To be able to communicate, to arouse sympathy and understanding, rather than provoke resistance, should be the goal of all students of literature seeking to use psychology as a means of attaining criticism-in-depth and demonstrating constantly the inter-play of literature and of life. Above all the student must not undervalue his own training and background which has fitted him for dealing with literary history and criticism.

Work in Progress

At the December meeting members filled out address cards on which they also listed books, articles, and projects which were in progress at the time. We should like to list such works in the next issue of this Newsletter. If any member has an additional entry for the list, or wishes to withdraw any project he has already listed with us, we should appreciate hearing from him before October 31st.

One contribution to this section has already been submitted by a newly-enrolled member, Dr. Peter Heller, who writes that he is "at present engaged in a survey of 'Freudian Interpretations of German Literature.' I intend to restrict my enquiry to contributions which either appeared in accredited psychoanalytic (Freudian) publications or which were made by professional (Freudian) psychoanalysts. That is to say, I shall not take into account works written either by members of strongly divergent schools. . . or by scholars and literary men who sought to apply psychoanalytic methods. While the survey envisaged will be primarily bibliographical and descriptive, I hope to include some critical comments."

Dr. Heller will be with the German Department, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., beginning in October of this year.

Bibliography (III)

Another Ph.D. dissertation from a member (see last few entries of Bibliography (I)) is

Peter Heller - The Writer's Image of the Writer: A Study in the Ideologies of Six German Authors, 1918-1933 (available, as yet, only in microfilm). "In the concluding chapter of this work and specifically in a section of it entitled 'The Masochistic Rebel,' I attempted to apply psychoanalytic concepts and methods to the ideologies of the authors investigated."

Professor Lucyle Hook of Barnard College calls our attention to

Patrick Mullahy - Oedipus: Myth and Complex, a Review of Psychoanalytic Theory (New York, 1948.)

In his "Preface" Mr. Mullahy tells that this book was originally planned as a joint effort with Dr. Erich Fromm, who, obliged to withdraw, wrote the "Introduction." It was ultimately decided "to combine an exposition of the Oedipus complex and myth with a fairly comprehensive exposition of psychoanalytic theory." The exposition is necessarily terse and requires more familiarity with psychoanalytic terminology and personalities than the author evidently believed. There is a tendency frequently to talk down to the reader, indicating an anticipated reader of little sophistication in psychoanalysis. The volume serves better as a review than as an introductory exposition. The theories of Adler, Jung, Rank, Horney, Fromm, and Sullivan follow those of Sigmund Freud, the announced objective being objectivity rather than eclecticism. The Richard Jebb translation of Oedipus Rex, Oedipus at Colonus, and Antigone follows the exposition. There is an extensive bibliography.

Two Studies of 19th century literature which have considerable relevance for our group -- a new book and an older study in a new edition -- are:

W. H. Auden - The Enchafèd Flood: or, The Romantic Iconography of the Sea (London, 1950), which deals with the psychology of poetic symbols, from Wordsworth to Moby Dick, and

Mario Praz - The Romantic Agony (Italian edition, 1931; 1st English trans. 1933, 2d Eng. ed., 1951) translated by A. Davidson. This analysis of the interaction of the psychology of the writer (given intensely personal expression in the works of Byron and DeSade) and the poetic tradition shows the evolving tradition of the Byronic artist. This evolution includes demonic woman figures as well as demonic men.

An earlier study of Romanticism which can be profitably compared with Praz is

Albert Nordell - The Erotic Motive in Literature (London, 1919).

The papers of Ernst Kris (solo or in collaboration -- see Bibliographies (I) and (II) --) are keen analyses, each by means of a clearly formulated set of propositions, of esthetic problems. They are provocative essays in method, quite apart from their subject matter, since the propositions suggest further studies, parallel or in extension. Especially interesting for those acquainted with Empson's Seven Types of Ambiguity is

Abraham Kaplan and Ernst Kris - "Esthetic Ambiguity," in Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Vol. VIII, no. 3 (March, 1948). (See also Vol. VII, no. 3--the previous year's spring issue of this journal, which is entirely devoted to "Papers and Comments on Phenomenology and Psychology.")

The development of the psychological conflict of Shakespeare's Henry, Prince of Wales (later King Henry V) is traced in

Ernst Kris - "Prince Hal's Conflict," in The Psychoanalytic Quarterly, Vol. XVII, no. 4 (October, 1948).

Specific consideration is given, in the final pages (504-6), to the hostility which has resulted from "the intrusion of psychoanalysis" into literary criticism. (As Mr. Edel has noted, there were two "invasions" and writers and literary critics brought in quite as many of the new insights and terms as the psychoanalysts did.)

Dr. Kris offers suggestions for several different categories of investigation, where "an application of psychoanalysis might be integrated with the work of the literary historian or critic." It is such integration that our conference group desires, such integration that would enable us to break out of the kind of criticism Dr. Boothe of Topeka (see News-Letter no. 3) calls "on the whole primitive, fragmentary, and haphazardly motivated." To quote Dr. Boothe further: "The effort to clarify the issues and objectives of psychologically sound criticism would naturally seem to a community such as ours very important."

We are all familiar with the pejorative use of "psychoanalytic" in criticism, even when the hostile critic writes approvingly of insights which the initiated know to be derived from application of psychoanalytic theory. In his review (Saturday Review of Literature, April 28, 1951) of

Irving Howe - Sherwood Anderson (New York, 1951)

Charles Angoff writes: "Following the latest trend of applying lay psychoanalysis to the lives of eminent authors, Mr. Howe seems to detect a form of mother fixation in Anderson's life and hints that Anderson's wives were in one way or another reminders of his mother. . . .Unfortunately, it is not always clear what Mr. Howe is trying to prove with all these 'findings.'" Toward the end of his essay, Mr. Angoff writes: "Mr. Howe puts his finger upon a central phenomenon in Anderson's work when he says that his fictional treatment of sex reveals a highly disturbed feeling toward it. 'Sex is talked about, buzzed about -- but it is not there. What is there is an arbitrary redressing of reality to salve a bruised male will.'"

In a bibliographical note to his own study of William Godwin, David Fleisher is even more direct in the pejorative implication he gives the term "psychoanalytic interpretation." After asserting what no student of Godwin could possibly deny, that "Godwin's character is unusually complex," Mr. Fleisher lists

George Woodcock - William Godwin: A Biographical Study (London, 1946)

with the comment that it "is a sympathetic biography, but it does not achieve a full-bodied portrait, and it is occasionally marred by psychoanalytic interpretation." The first part of the statement can be allowed; Mr. Woodcock could well have been more political, as is Mr. Fleisher. Mr. Woodcock -- and Mr. Fleisher -- could have been, very profitably, more psychoanalytical. Indeed, it can be argued that Godwin's unusual complexities will not be explained until an unusual grasp of both politics and psychology combine in his biographer. Mr. Woodcock deals with the relationship of Godwin to his clergyman father and finds therein the origins of William Godwin's later battle against religious and political authority. He deals less thoroughly with the relationship of the son to his mother, and pays little psychoanalytic heed to the succeeding personal relationships or political relationships of William Godwin's long and complex life. The Woodcock study is "marred" not by psychoanalytic interpretation but by the occasional nature of its use and the very superficial understanding of its theory. In spite of the technical vocabulary to be found in the opening chapter, this is "hit-and-run criticism" psychoanalytically.

In the May 25th issue of the Times Literary Supplement appeared a letter to the editor headed "Psychology and Criticism." Muriel Spark refers to "a tendency at present to denounce 'psychology' alike with the 'psychoanalytical treatment' as applied to critical-biography. . . .Some critical-biographers themselves seem anxious to deprecate these methods--see, for example, page one of Miss Eileen Bigland's Ouida, and a bibliographical note in Mr. David Fleisher's William Godwin; both of these writers, however, use a psychological method whether they are aware of it or not, and do so to advantage.

"What reviewers tend now to take for granted is that to use 'psychology' in the criticism of literature or literary people is to apply values proper only to

the medical profession. This arises from the fallacy that 'psychology' is something comparatively new. . . .

"It happens that [the psychological critic] has at his disposal a set of terms from the scientific vocabulary of modern psychology, which he calls upon to support the convictions he arrives at intuitively. That is surely an excellent thing. The danger is that such terminology may fascinate and fall into the hands of the inexpert. But to assume that either a 'psychological' or 'psychoanalytic approach to a subject is intrinsically false would place a new and dangerous restraint upon literary biography."

Brief listing:

Salvador de Madariaga - Don Quixote: an Introductory Essay in Psychology (London, 1934)

René Laforgue - The Defeat of Baudelaire: a Psychoanalytical Study of the Neurosis of Charles Baudelaire, translated from the French by Herbert Agar (1st English ed., London, 1932)

Edgar A. Peers - Elizabethan Drama and Its Mad Folk (Cambridge, 1914)

Lawrence Babb - Elizabethan Malady: A Study of Melancholia in English Literature from 1580 to 1640 (East Lansing, Michigan, 1951).

We shall continue our project of listing items culled from the indices, particularly Psychological Abstracts. The 1951 issues have not yet been indexed, but we reproduce here some of the more interesting items which are included under the heading "Aesthetics."

Charles Baudouin - "La Sublimation des images chez Huysmans, lors de sa conversion." Psyché, 1950 - 5 - 378-385.

Joel Friedman and Sylvia Gassel - "The chorus in Sophocles' Oedipus Tyrannus," a psychoanalytic approach to dramatic criticism, in which the chorus is viewed as the spokesman for the moral taboos of the community, in opposition to the collective ego of the hero, the protagonist whose acts are secretly desired by the very community which condemns them. Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 1950, vol.19 - 213-226.

E. Racker - "Ensayo psicoanalitico sobre la personalidad y la obra dramatica de Ricardo Wagner." Wagner's behavior patterns and music-dramas are discussed in the light of their oedipal significance. Rev. psicoanal.(Buenos Aires),1948, 6:32-61.

Theodore Reik - "The psychology of irony: a study based on Anatole France." France is approached through his short story Le Jongleur de Notre Dame. In Complex (Spring, 1951) 14-26. (Also published in French in Psyché: 1950:5:472-84.

Martin Waugh - "Othello: the tragedy of Iago." The probable homosexual motivation of Iago is discussed. Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 1950. Vol.19: pp.202-12.

Clifford Allen - "The problem of John Ruskin; a psycho-sexological analysis." Ruskin's inability to establish normal hetero-sexual relations with an adult woman is analyzed and diagnosed psychoanalytically. Int. Jour. Sexol., 1950:4:7-.

Sidney J. Baker - "Shakespeare and Sex." The device of the literary analysis of Shakespeare's imagery is applied to the terms used by Shakespeare in dealing with sexual contacts. The author, let it be noted, concludes that Shakespeare was free "from sexual inhibitions without any asocial or psychopathic tendencies." Int. Jour. Sexol. 1950 - 4 - 35-39.

Sara Breitbart - "Hedda Gabler: a critical analysis." Hedda is psychoanalyzed. (How did anyone miss doing it before?) Amer. Jour. Psychoanal., 1948 - 8 - 55-58.

Bella S. Van Bark - "The Sudden Guest: a critical analysis." Here the character under psychoanalytic scrutiny is Carrel Leckton in LaFarge's novel. Amer. Jour. Psychoanalysis, 1948 - 8 - 59-62.

Clifford Allen - "The personality of Radclyffe Hall." The late author of the controversial The Well of Loneliness is analyzed. Int. Journ. Sexol., 1950:4:95-8.

Mark Kanzer - "The Oedipus trilogy." Oedipus, Creon, and Theseus are considered as three oedipal stages of the same character. Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 1950 - vol. 19 - 561-572.

Joseph W. Vollmerhausen - "Pavillion of Women." Pearl S. Buck's novel is psychoanalyzed. American Journal of Psychoanalysis. 1950. vol.10 - 53-60.

A summary of Leonard Manheim's The Dickens Pattern (See Bibliography I) is now to be found in Microfilm Abstracts, 1950, vol.10 (4),pp.218-19.

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